Discovering Shi‘i Islam

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In the Name of Allah the Compassionate the Merciful
All praise belongs to Allah, the Lord of all worlds

Introduction

The present work is a summarized version of Shi‘i Islam: Origins, Faith and Practices (2003, ICAS Press) by the same author. This shorter version aims to briefly address main issues related to Islam in general and Shi‘i Islam in particular. These two works represent a modest attempt to fill some of the gaps that exist in the field of Islamic studies in general, and Shi‘i studies in particular. Though simply and clearly written, they are outcomes of more than twenty years of involvement in Islamic studies, and based to some extent on two series of lectures about Shi‘i Islam delivered to English-speaking audiences: a first set of some fifty lectures delivered at Jami‘at al-Zahra (a prominent Islamic seminary for women) in Qum, Iran in 1995 and 1996, and a second set of some thirty lectures delivered at the Manchester Islamic Institute and the Shi‘a Welfare Centre in Manchester, England in 1998 and 1999.

The first chapter begins by expounding both the literal and technical meanings of the term “Shi‘a”, and references are made to statements of famous scholars in this regard. Then it proceeds to study the origins of Shi‘i Islam and how it came into existence.

The second chapter studies the sources of Shi‘i thought, i.e. the Qur’an, the Sunnah, reason and consensus. Discussing the status of the Qur’an, the chapter goes on to establish that the Shi‘a like other Muslims believe that the Qur’an which is present today is an embodiment of divine revelation to the Prophet Muhammad. The chapter continues by explaining the second most important source, i.e. the Sunnah, which includes the sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad. The Qur’an itself asks Muslims to take the Prophet as their role model, to refer to him to judge and settle their conflicts, and speaks of the Prophet as the one who recites, teaches and explains the Qur’an. In this chapter there is also a discussion about the household of the Prophet (Ahlul Bayt) and their role in presenting the Sunnah. Then there follows a discussion about the importance of reason and its role in understanding Islamic beliefs, values and practical laws. Finally there is a discussion about legal consensus (al-ijmā‘) and how it is viewed with respect to the Sunnah in the Shi‘i teachings.

The third chapter studies fundamental doctrines of the Shi‘i faith. Along with Unity of God, prophethood and resurrection which constitute the principles of religion for Islam and other divine religions, some important additional doctrines such as divine justice and imamate are studied. These doctrines may partly be shared by other Muslims, but the Shi‘a are those who believe in all of them.

The fourth chapter is a very brief account of Shi‘i practices along with brief references to the objectives and principles underlying them. These practices are in principle shared by all Muslims, though there may be some differences in particulars among different Islamic schools.

The fifth and final chapter is a short discussion about the Shi‘a world today. This chapter starts with a brief account of the latest statistics about the present Muslim and Shi‘i population of the world. There is also a breakdown of religious affiliations of some countries with a long history of Shi‘i presence. Although there are no accurate and approved statistics on the current Shi‘a population in the world, efforts have been made here to collect the best available.

I should also note that the author is sincerely and wholeheartedly committed to Islamic unity and hopes that this work can serve as a modest step towards Muslim brotherhood. In fact, one of the best means of achieving this unity and brotherhood is to know each other and to overcome the historical prejudices that prevent objective understanding between each other. According to what Imam Ali has said, “People are enemies of what do not know”.

A careful study of all major Islamic schools shows that what they have in common is much more than what they differ about. All Muslims believe in the same God, the same Prophet and the same Qur’an. They all believe in the Day of Resurrection and divine rewards and punishments. They all say their daily prayers towards the same direction, that is, Mecca. They all fast the whole month of Ramadan. They all perform pilgrimage to Mecca (hajj) at the same time. They all believe in giving alms, enjoining good and forbidding evil. They all believe that they should make friends with the people of faith and good intention and keep away from enemies of God. They all adhere to the same virtues and values. According to the Qur’an, all believers are “brothers”. Regardless of their colour, race, gender, and denomination, there are certain duties towards each other that brothers and sisters in faith must discharge.

Once Mu‘alla b. Khunays asked Imam Sadiq about what one Muslim owes another. Imam replied: “There are seven duties incumbent upon him. Should he neglect but one of them, he is not a friend or a servant of God, and truly he has done nothing for the sake of God”.

Then Imam mentioned the following:

a) Wish for your brother what you wish for yourself, and wish that what you do not desire for yourself should not befall your brother.

b) Do not make your brother angry, but seek to please him and obey his wishes.

c) Help him with your soul, your property, your tongue, your hands and your feet.

d) Be the eye that he sees with, his guide and his mirror.

e) Do not eat your fill when he is hungry, nor drink and clothe yourself when he is thirsty and naked.

f) If he has no servant, but you do, it is incumbent on you to send your servant to him to wash his clothes, cook his food and spread out his mattress.

g) Accept his promise and his invitation; visit him when he is sick, attend his funeral, and see to his needs before he asks you, hurrying to do them if you can. (Muzaffar, pp. 76 & 77).

Unfortunately, there have always been some short-sighted people among each group or sect who have tried to magnify the differences and have called for separation instead of unity and brotherhood. They hasten to find some excuses to call anyone who disagrees with them a kāfir (disbeliever) or a mushrik (polytheist) and any act that does not please them bid‘ah (heresy). Of course, there are disbelievers and there are heretics, but one must be very cautious in applying these terms. Great Islamic leaders and scholars, whether they be Sunni or Shi‘a, have never attached these labels to each other. In this way, they have represented in their fatwas, sayings and deeds the real spirit of Islam, this harmonious and universal message of peace, justice, unity and mercifulness.

Islam brought unity and solidarity for those who suffered a great deal from enmity and hostility (3:103). This act of unifying people is highly esteemed as a divine act (8:63). On the contrary, the action of people such as Pharaoh was to disunite people (28:4). The Qur’an warns believers that if they start disputing with each other they will weaken and they will, therefore, be defeated (8:46). In fact, the call for unity is not limited to Muslims. The Qur’an invites all people of faith such as Christians and Jews to unify their efforts and concentrate on their common ground (3:64). Let us hope and pray that day by day this sense of unity and solidarity intensifies.

At the end, I would like to take this opportunity to thank all the individuals and organisations that have encouraged me, especially Ayatollah Muhsin Araki, Islamic College for Advanced Studies, and the Ahlul Bayt Assembly of UK and the Republic of Ireland in London. Last but certainly not least, I would like to express my feelings of deep gratitude to God for all His favours that He has bestowed upon us in the past and in the present.

Mohammad A. Shomali

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Chapter 1: Origins of Shi'i Islam

The meaning of the term Shi'a

In Arabic, the term "Shi'a" originally means one, two or a group of followers. In the Glorious Qur'an, this term is used several times in this sense. For example, God speaks of one of the followers of Moses as one of his Shi'a in the verse (28:15). Elsewhere, Abraham is introduced as a Shi'a of Noah (37:83). In the beginning of the history of Islam, the term "Shi'a" was used in its original or literal sense for followers of different people. For example, some hadiths speak of the Shi'a of Ali b. Abi Talib and others of the Shi'a of Mu'awiyah b. Abi Sufyan. However, gradually the term acquired a secondary or technical meaning, i.e. the followers of Ali, those who believed in his Imamate (divinely appointed leadership).

Shahrestani (d. 548 A.H) in his Al-Milal wa al-Nihal, an outstanding source about different sects in Islam, writes, "The Shi'a are those who followed Ali in particular and believed in his Imamate and caliphate according to the explicit teachings and will of the Prophet Muhammad." This is a very accurate definition, since the Shi'a themselves believe that the reason for following Ali is that it was required by the Prophet and it was not their personal decision to choose whom to follow, unlike the non-Shi'a who, after the death of the Prophet Muhammad, followed Abu Bakr b. Abi Quhafah who was chosen at Saqīfah and believed that the Prophet had left it to the people themselves to decide whom to follow. Of course, Abu Bakr himself believed that he must appoint his successor. And the second Caliph, 'Umar b. Khattab, in turn appointed a council of six people to choose one amongst themselves according to a very strict procedure set up by him. It is interesting to note that it was Ali, the fourth Caliph, who was chosen and indeed forced by nearly all Muslims after the murder of the third Caliph, 'Uthman b. 'Affan to undertake the position of caliphate.

In his Firaq al-Shi'a, al-Hasan b. Musa al-Nawbakhti (d. 313 A.H), a well-known Shi'a scholar, writes, "the Shi'a are the party of Ali b. Abi Talib. They were called 'Shi'a' of Ali during and after the life of the Prophet and are known as the followers of Ali and believers in his Imamate". Shaykh al-Mufid (d. 413 A.H), one of the most outstanding early Shi'a scholars, defines the Shi'a as being those who follow Ali and believe in his immediate successorship to the Prophet. Explaining why the Shi'a are also called "Imāmīyah", he says: "This is a title for those who believe in the necessity of Imamate and its continuity in all ages, and that every Imam must be explicitly designated, and must also be infallible and perfect."

Thus, it can be said that Shi'a Muslims are those who have the following beliefs about the successorship to the Prophet Muhammad:

a. Successorship to the Prophet is a divinely appointed position.

b. As the Prophet was chosen by God, his successor or Imam must also be chosen by God and then made known by the Prophet.

c. The immediate successor to the Prophet Muhammad was Ali.

When did Shi'ism start?

Naturally the question arises as to when Shi'ism started. There are many hadiths narrated by both Shi'a and non-Shi'a scholars regarding the issue of Imamate that will be studied later when discussing Shi'i doctrines. In what follows, however, we will study only some hadiths in which the Prophet Muhammad spoke of a group of people as "Shi'a" (followers) of Ali, and we will then refer to some other reasons from hadiths and the history of Islam. All hadiths mentioned below are cited from respected Sunni sources. These are only a few of the most important narrations, and there are many more to be found in the sources mentioned here as well as others.

(1) Ibn 'Asakir (d. 571 A.H) narrated from Jabir b. 'Abdullah al-Ansari that he said:

Once we were with the Prophet Muhammad, when Ali arrived, upon which the Prophet said, "I swear by Him who has my life in His hand that surely this man and his Shi'a will be happy on the Day of Resurrection". Then the verse "Surely those who believe and do good deeds are the best of creation" (98:7) was revealed. Later, whenever the companions of the Prophet Muhammad saw Ali coming, they would say, 'The best of creation has come'. (Ibn 'Asakir, Vol. 2, p. 442 & al-Suyuti, Vol. 6, p. 589)

(2) Ibn Hajar (d. 974) narrated from Ibn Abbas that when the verse (98:7) was revealed the Prophet told Ali:

Those are you and your Shi'a. On the Day of Resurrection you will be pleased and well pleasing (to God), and your enemies will come angry and will be seized by their necks. (Ibn Hajar, Section 11, Chapter 1, the Verse 11)

(3) Ibn al-Athir (d. 606) narrated that, addressing Ali, the Prophet said:

O Ali! You and your Shi'a will reach God being pleased with Him and well pleasing Him, and your enemies will reach Him, being angry and will be seized by their necks. Then the Prophet demonstrated how this would be by putting his hand on his neck. (Ibn al-Athir, the entry "qa-ma-°a")

There are other hadiths in which the Prophet Muhammad, addressing Ali, used the expression “our Shi'a”. This is in line with what was asserted above that the Shi'a are those who follow Ali, in accordance with the teachings of the Prophet and not because of their own personal decision. For example, Ibn 'Asakir narrated that the Prophet said:

"Surely there is a spring in Paradise sweeter than nectar, smoother than butter, cooler than ice, and more fragrant than musk. In that spring is the clay (ñínah) from which we (my household and me) were created and our Shi'a are made from the same clay." (Ibn ‘Asakir, Vol. 1, p. 129, No. 180)

There are yet other hadiths in which the Prophet, addressing Ali, used the expression "Shi'a of your descendants". This confirms what was suggested above, that the Shi'a are those who follow Ali because they believe in the institution of Imamate. As we will see in detail, the Shi'a believe that Ali was the first Imam and after him the institution of Imamate continued in those offspring of Ali and Fatimah that were chosen by God and introduced by the Prophet. For example, Zamakhshari (d. 528 A.H) in his Rabi‘ al-Abrar reports that the Prophet said: "O Ali! When the Day of Resurrection comes I will hold on to God, you will hold on to me, your descendants will hold on to you and their Shi'a will hold on to them. Then you will see where we will be taken."

It has to be noted that according to the Qur'an, prophethood was also inherited. The Qur'an says: "And surely we have sent Noah and Abraham, and we placed prophethood and the Book in their offspring". (57:26) This means that those who were qualified to be chosen as prophets by God were included in their offspring.

In addition to the above-mentioned hadiths and their like, and the hadiths on Imamate, there are many other reasons that make the appearance of a group of people such as the Shi'a in the lifetime of the Prophet a very natural and even necessary phenomenon. For example, at the beginning of Islam when the Prophet was asked by God to start his public invitation to Islam by inviting his close relatives, he called his relatives to a meal. After the meal the Prophet introduced his mission and invited the guests to Islam and stated that whoever believed in Islam among them and assisted him would be his successor. All kept silent. The only one who accepted the invitation to assist him was Ali, a teenager at that time. The Prophet asked him to sit and repeated his invitation for the second and the third time. Again and again it was just Ali who expressed his readiness to support the Prophet. The Prophet accepted Ali's submission to the will of God and carried out Allah's command to designate him as his successor. This event is documented in many sources.

In a very important statement, the Prophet clearly affirmed that Ali was truthful and free of false beliefs and wrong acts, be it in his personal conduct or in his speech and judgements, and implicitly asked Muslims to follow him. Umm Salamah reported that the Prophet said: "Ali is always with the truth (al-1aqq) and the truth is always with him, and until the Day of Resurrection they will not separate from each other". This particular hadith is narrated by Ibn ‘Abbas, Abu Bakr, ‘A’ishah, Abu Sa'id al-Khuddari, Abu Layla, and Abu Ayyub al-Ansari. The Prophet is also quoted as saying, "May God bless Ali. My Lord, make the truth always be with him".

The Prophet also asserted on several occasions that Ali was the most knowledgeable among the people in matters pertaining to Islamic sciences. For example, the Prophet said: "Wisdom has been divided into ten parts: nine parts have been given to Ali and one part has been distributed among the rest of the people". Later the second Caliph reaffirmed the saying of the Prophet when he said, "May God never afflict me with a difficult task when Ali is not present".

One also has to take into account the valuable and vital services and sacrifices of Ali in order to be able to realise his position among Muslims. For example, when the infidels of Mecca planned to kill the Prophet, and God informed him of their plot, the Prophet asked Ali whether he would be willing to sleep in his place so that the pagans would think that he was still at home, allowing him to safely leave Mecca. Ali accepted this task, on the occasion of which the verse was revealed, “And among people are those who sell their souls to acquire divine pleasure” (2:207). The emigration of the Prophet from Mecca to Medina marks the beginning of the Islamic Calendar. Ali served the cause of Islam by fighting in the Battles of Badr, Uhud, Khaybar, Khandaq and Hunayn, in all of which he played crucial roles. These are all registered in numerous historical works and collections of hadiths by non-Shi'a scholars.

The Prophetic hadiths on the issue of the Imamate in general, and about Ali in particular, need to be studied separately. However, I would like to conclude the discussion here by referring to the well-known hadith of Ghadir Khumm. Returning from his last pilgrimage to Mecca, the Prophet asked thousands of Muslims accompanying him to stop on the way. He stood on a platform or pulpit made for him out of saddles and said, "Whoever has adopted me as his master (mawlā), Ali now is his master". Then, those present, including the first and second Caliphs to be, paid allegiance to Ali and congratulated him. This hadith is transmitted by more than one hundred sources. For a comprehensive list of non-Shi'a sources of this hadith, see 'Abaqat al-Anwar by Mir Hamid Husayn al-Hindi (d. 1306 A.H) and Al-Ghadir by ‘Abd al-Husayn al-Amini (d. 1390 A.H). Having affirmed the veracity of the hadith, some Sunni writers have interpreted the term mawlā used in this hadith in another way. According to them, the term mawlā here is used in the sense of friendship. Whether this can be accepted or not, there is no doubt that this tradition and the event gave Ali a unique and central position among the companions of the Prophet.

Thus, it seems that the different sets of hadiths along with the historical evidence mentioned above leave no doubt that during the lifetime of the Prophet many Muslims came to love Ali deeply and sought his company, and were determined to follow him after the Prophet. These people were so frequently and significantly referred to as the Shi'a of Ali that gradually the term “Shi'a” became synonymous with the Shi'a of Ali. More important than this is the fact that the idea of the Imamate of Ali certainly started in the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad. The demise of the Prophet naturally brought the issue into focus and distinguished those who still believed in the necessity of following Ali from other Muslims, who sooner or later came to believe in the institution of the caliphate as the successorship to the Prophet in ruling the Islamic society, and not as a divinely appointed position. Describing events after the death of the prophet, Al-Mas‘udi (d. 345 A.H), a great Sunni historian, writes: “Indeed Imam Ali and those of his Shi'a who were with him stayed in his house at the time that the allegiance to Abu Bakr was made.”

Later, certain events, such as the wars that occurred during the Caliphate of Ali and the event of Karbalā in which Husayn, the third imam of the Shi'a and seventy two people of his family and companions were killed, defined Shi'a identity more sharply. For example, we find in one of the early works that Ali, condemning Talhah and Zubayr, said: "Surely the followers of Talhah and Zubayr in Basra killed my Shi'a and my agents". Abū Mikhnaf (d. 158 A.H) reports that after the death of Mu'awiyah the Shi'a gathered at the house of Sulayman b. Surad and he told them: “Mu'awiyah has died and Husayn has refused to pay allegiance to the Umayyads and has departed towards Mecca and you are his Shi'a and the Shi'a of his father”.

Early Shi'a

Naturally, Shi'i Islam first started in the Hijaz amongst the companions of the Prophet. Reference to the Islamic historical and biographical works shows that the list of the Shi'a among the companions of the Prophet includes the following well-known bani Hashim (offspring of Hashim, great-grandfather of the Prophet Muhammad): ‘Abdullah b. al-‘Abbas, al-Fadl b. al-‘Abbas, ‘Ubaydillah b. al-‘Abbas, Qiththam b. al-‘Abbas, ‘Abd al-Rahman b. al-‘Abbas, Tamam b. al-‘Abbas, Aqil b. Abi Talib, Abu Sufyan b. al-Harth b. ‘Abd al-Mutallib, Naufil b. al-Harth, ‘Abdullah b. Ja‘far b. Abi Talib, ‘Awn b. Ja‘far, Muhammad b. Ja'far, Rabi‘at b. al-Harth b. ‘Abd al-Mutallib, al-Tufayl b. al-Harth, al-Mughayrat b. Nawfil b. al-Harith, ‘Abdullah b. al-Harth b. Nawfil, ‘Abdullah b. Abi Sufyan b. al-Harth, al-‘Abbas b. Rabi‘at b. al-Harth, al-‘Abbas b. ‘Utbah b. Abi Lahab, ‘Abd al-Mutallib b. Rabi‘at b. al-Harth, Ja‘far b. Abi Sufyan b. al-Harth. The list of Shi'a among those companions of the Prophet who were not bani Hashim includes: Salman, Miqdad, Abu Dharr, ‘Ammar b. Yasir, Hudhayfah b. al-Yaman, Khuzaymah b. Thabit, Abu Ayyub al-Ansari, Abu al-Haytham Malik b. al-Tihan, Ubayy b. Ka‘b, Qays b. Sa‘d b. ‘Ubadah, ‘Adiy b. Hatam, ‘Ubadah b. al-Samit, Bilal al-Habashi, Abu Rafi‘, Hashim b. ‘Utbah, ‘Uthman b. Hunayf, Sahl b. Hunayf, Hakim b. Jibillah al-‘Abdi, Khalid b. Sa‘id b. al-‘Aas, Ibn Husayb al-Aslami, Hind b. Abi Halah al-Tamimi, Ju‘dah b. Hubayrah, Hujr b. ‘Adiy al-Kindi, ‘Amr b. al-Hamq al-Khuza‘i, Jabir b. ‘Abdullah al-Ansari, Muhammad b. Abi Bakr (the son of the first Caliph), Aban b. Sa‘id b. al-‘Asi, and Zayd b. Sauhan.

Chapter 2: Sources of Shi'i Thought

Before studying Shi'a doctrines or practices, it is necessary to know the sources on which the Shi'a rely for understanding Islam. In what follows, we will study the four sources of Shi'i thought, or in other words the four sources on which, from a Shi'i point of view, any investigation about Islam has to be based: the Glorious Qur'an, the Sunnah, reason and consensus.

The Glorious Qur'an

Needless to say, the Qur'an is the most important source for all Muslims, including the Shi'a. The Qur'an also acts as an instrument of unity among all Muslims. Regardless of their different sectarian and cultural backgrounds, all Muslims refer to the same book as the divine guide to govern their life. Today, as in any other time, there exists only one Qur'an, without any addition or alteration, throughout the Muslim world. A typical Shi'a standpoint towards the Qur'an can be found in the following passage:

We believe that the Qur'an was divinely inspired, and revealed by Allah on the tongue of His honourable Prophet, making clear everything, an everlasting miracle. Man is unable to write anything like it because of its eloquence, clarity, truth and knowledge, and no alteration can be made to it. The Qur'an we have now is exactly what was sent to the Prophet, and anyone who claims otherwise is either an evil-doer, a mere sophist or else a person in error, and all of them have gone astray, because it is the speech of Allah, and: “Falsehood cannot come at it from before it or from behind.” (41:42)

…We also believe that we must respect and give dignity to the Glorious Qur'an, and this both in word and in deed. Therefore, it must not be defiled intentionally, not even one of its letters, and it must not be touched by one who is not tahir [i.e. 'pure']. It is said in the Qur'an: “None can touch it save the purified.” (56:79) [Muzaffar, p. 26]

Shi'a deny any alteration in the Qur'an

As mentioned above, the Shi'a deny any alteration in the Qur'an and believe that the Qur'an available today is the same that was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad. The Qur'an is complete. No one has ever seen a copy of the Qur'an different from the standard one in any part of the Islamic world. There are manuscripts of the Qur'an available today that go back to the time of Shi'a Imams and they are exactly the same as the current ones.

The Glorious Qur'an itself explicitly says that God Himself preserves the Qur'an from any alteration and distortion:

Surely We have revealed the Reminder and We will most surely be its preserver. (15:9)

Regarding this verse, 'Allamah Tabataba'i in his renowned Al-Mizan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an, one of the greatest commentaries of the Qur'an, states:

…the Qur'an is a living and eternal Reminder which will never die and fall into oblivion. It is immune from any addition and loss. It is immune from and secure against any alterations in form and style which could affect its character and role, that is, as, "the Reminder of Allah which expresses divine truth and knowledge". For this reason, the aforesaid verse indicates that the divine Book has always been and will continue to be guarded against any distortion and alteration. (Vol. 12, p. 99)

The Sunnah

After the Glorious Qur'an, the most important source for understanding Islam and therefore Shi'i thought is the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad, including his sayings and his deeds. The Qur'an itself grants this high position to the Prophet, as he is referred to as the one who is responsible for explaining the Qur'an (16:44) and teaching the Qur'an and wisdom (62:2). The Prophet is a perfect example for the believers (33:21). He never speaks out of his own wishes (53:3). Muslims are asked to hold on to whatever he gives them and refrain from whatever he prohibits (59:7).

Knowing the above verses and many other verses regarding the status of the Prophet, and taking into account the significance of being a divine messenger chosen directly by God and spoken to by Him, the Shi'a, along with other Muslims, cultivated a state of sincere love for and devotion to the Prophet Muhammad.

The household of the Prophet

There seems to be no disagreement among Muslims about the validity of following the teachings of the household of the Prophet in understanding Islam, especially according to the Sunni view which considers even all the companions of the Prophet as reliable sources of understanding Islam. There is no doubt, then, that the household of the Prophet are reliable and trustworthy in their understanding and presentation of Islam.

This fact becomes even clearer when we refer to the traditions from the Prophet about his household, and examine sayings of Sunni scholars about the knowledge of Ali and other members of the household of the Prophet. For example, Imam Malik says: “No eyes have seen, no ears have heard, and nothing has come to the heart of any human being better than Ja'far b. Muhammad, who is distinguished in his knowledge, his piety, his asceticism, and in his servitude to God.” This is what Ibn Taymiyah reports from Imam Malik in his book. In a survey about those who narrated from Imam Sadiq, Shaykh al-Mufid (d.413) in his al-Irshad asserts that those who were trustworthy among them from different schools of thought were 4000 in number.

Thus, there is no ambiguity here and this is why many Sunni scholars such as the late Shaykh Shaltut have clearly pointed out that every Muslim is allowed to act according to one of the five Islamic schools of fiqh: Ja'fari, Hanafi, Hanbali, Maliki and Shafi'i.

The reason is clear, because if Imam Ja'far Sadiq, for example, did not possess more knowledge or better access to the knowledge of the Prophet than the rest, then one has to admit that he must have been at least equal to others, especially if we bear in mind whom he taught such as Abu Hanifah, the Imam of Hanafi Muslims who attended Imam Sadiq's lectures for two years.

People who are educated or who seek the truth are expected, therefore, to examine all Islamic sources available, and thereby come to a conclusion about the ways Muslims can lead exemplary lives. Certainly one rich source is the teachings of the household of the Prophet.

Now, let us see whether it is necessary to refer to the household of the Prophet in understanding Islam. To provide an answer I will focus only on some traditions from the Prophet narrated by great Sunni narrationists and accepted by both Sunni and Shi'a scholars. But prior to that it has to be noted that all the teachings of the household of the Prophet were always based on the Glorious Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Prophet. No one should think, for example, that Imam Sadiq was saying something according to his own opinion about Islam. Whatever they uttered was exactly what they had themselves received from the Prophet. There are many traditions in this regard. For example, in Usul al-Kafi we find that Imam Sadiq said that whatever he said was what he had received through his forefathers from the Prophet.

One of these traditions is the famous tradition of Thaqalayn. This tradition was uttered by the Prophet on different occasions, including the day of 'Arafah in his last pilgrimage and the 18th of Dhu'l-Hijjah in Ghadir Khum. Despite minor differences in the wording the essence remains the same in all versions of the tradition. For example, in one version of the tradition the Prophet said:

“Oh people! I leave among you two precious things: the Book of God and my household. As long as you hold on to them you will not go astray.”

Or in another tradition the Prophet said:

“I leave among you two precious things, which if you hold on to you will not go astray after me: the Book of God which is like a rope extended between the heaven and the earth, and my household. These two things will not separate from each other until they reach me near the fountain on the Day of Judgement. Take care in how you treat them after me.”

This shows that the Prophet was worried about the way that Muslims, or at least some of them, would treat the Qur'an and his household. In another tradition he said:

“I leave two successors: first, the Book of God which is like a rope extended between heaven and the earth, and second, my household. They will not separate from each other until they come to me near the fountain of Kawthar.”

The above traditions can be found in major Sunni sources, such as: Sahih of Muslim (Vol. 8, p. 25, No. 2408), Musnad of Imam Ahmad (Vol. 3, p. 388, No. 10720), Sunan of Darimi (Vol. 2, p. 432), and Sahih of Tirmidhi (Vol. 5, p. 6432, No. 3788). They are also mentioned in books such as Usd al-Ghabah by Ibn Athir (Vol. 2, p. 13), Al-Sunan al-Kubra by Bayhaqi (Vol. 2, p. 198) and Kanz al-'Ummal (Vol. 1, p. 44).

Now let us reflect on the content of the hadith, i.e. the fact that the Prophet has left among Muslims two weighty things: the Qur'an and his household, and that as long as people hold on to them both, they will not go astray. This shows that these two things must always be in harmony with each other, and that they never contradict each other. Otherwise, the Prophet would not have given the instruction to follow both of them. Moreover, the people would get puzzled about what to do if the household of the Prophet were to tell them to go in one direction and the Book of God says to go in another. Although this fact is implicitly understandable from the beginning of hadith, the Prophet himself later explicitly confirmed this fact by saying, “They will not separate from each other until they come to me near the fountain of Kawthar”.

Thus, this hadith in all versions indicates that:

- From the time of the Prophet until the end of the world the Book of God and the household of the Prophet will always be together.
- No one can say that the book of God is enough, and that we do not need the household of the Prophet, or vice versa, for the Prophet clearly said: I leave two precious things that you must grasp and if you do so you will not be misled.
- The household of the Prophet would never make mistakes and they are always truthful.
- It is also interesting that according to this hadith the household of the Prophet, like the Qur'an itself, is held to be persistent until the Day of Judgement and Paradise. Thus, the household of the Prophet will never disappear, even for a short period of time.

The other hadith is the hadith of Safīnah (ship). All Muslims have narrated that the Prophet said:

“Be aware that surely the example of my household among you is like the example of the ship of Noah. Whoever boarded the ship of Noah was saved and whoever refused to enter the ship of Noah was drowned.”

The hadith of Safīnah in its different versions emphasises the same fact and can be found in different Sunni books. For example, it can be found in Mustadrak by Hakim Nishaburi, Vol. 3, pp. 149 & 151, Arba'in Hadith by Nabahani, al-Sawa'iq al-Muhriqah by Ibn Hajar amongst other sources.

Thus, according to these sets of traditions the appeal to the guidance of the household of the Prophet is of the utmost necessity.

Note: The tradition of thaqalayn is mentioned in both Sunni and Shi'a sources so it is a matter of agreement among all Muslims. However, there is a version of the hadith in which the Prophet is quoted as saying 'my Sunnah' instead of 'my household'. This version can only be found in some Sunni sources. Provided that this version too can be authenticated, there is no difficulty in understanding what this tradition means. The Prophet in many traditions narrated by all Muslims has said: “I am leaving two precious things and those are the glorious Qur'an and my household.” In a few traditions narrated only by a particular group of Muslims he has said: “the glorious Qur'an and my Sunnah”. Obviously the result would be that as one side of the comparison is the same, i.e. the Qur'an, the other side too must be identical. Therefore, 'my Sunnah' and 'my household' also must be identical; otherwise one has to say that there is no harmony in what the Prophet said. Thus, the very act of resorting to the teachings and advice of the household of the Prophet is the very act of resorting to the Sunnah of the Prophet. Thus, the only way to reach the Sunnah of the Prophet and to understand exactly what his Sunnah was is to refer to these people who have had the closest relationship with him and who knew better than anyone else what he said or did or approved.

Who constitute the household of the Prophet?

The other question concerns the exact meaning of “the household”. According to many traditions, we are told to refer to the household of the Prophet: “Ahlul Bayt” or “'Itrah”. What do these terms refer to? There is no doubt about the status of the household of the Prophet in Islam, but there may be a need to investigate the referent of the term to see whether it includes anyone who was a relative of the Prophet or not. Of course, there is no doubt among Muslims that certainly Fatimah, the daughter of the Prophet, Imam Ali, and their sons Imam Hasan and Imam Husayn are members of his household. The only concern is whether other relatives of the Prophet are included or not, and if so, to what extent.

Sunni Muslims believe that all relatives of the Prophet are included. Of course, they exclude those who did not embrace Islam, such as Abu Lahab, one of the uncles of the Prophet and at the same time one of his most hostile enemies who has been cursed in the Qur'an. Shi'a Muslims believe that the Ahlul Bayt are those who have appropriate levels of faith and knowledge that make it possible for them to be mentioned along with the Qur'an in the tradition of the Thaqalayn and others. Moreover, they believe that the Prophet himself has clearly defined who the Ahlul Bayt are.

In what follows, I will mention some hadiths narrated in major Sunni sources:

(1) Muslim narrates from 'Ayishah, Umm al-Mu'minin:

The Prophet went out wearing a black woollen cloak, when Hasan the son of Ali came to him, so the Prophet let Hasan come in with him under the cloak. Then Husayn came and he too entered. Then Fatimah came. She entered as well. Then Ali came. He also went under the cloak, such that the cloak covered the Prophet, Ali, Fatimah, Hasan and Husayn. Then the Prophet recited: 'God only desires to keep away impurity from you, O People of the House! And to purify you a (thorough) purification' (33:33).

(2) Muslim narrates from Sa'd b. Abi Waqqas that he was asked by Mu'awiyah why he refused to verbally abuse Ali. Sa'd replied:

“I remember three sayings of the Prophet about Ali which caused me not to say anything bad about him. If I possessed even one of these qualities it would be better for me than red camels. The first was that when the Prophet wanted to go to the war of Tabuk, he left Ali in Medina. Ali was very sad at not having the good fortune to join the army and fight for the sake of God. He went to the Prophet, saying: 'Do you leave me with children and women?' The Prophet replied: 'Are you not happy to be to me as Aaron was to Moses, except that there will be no prophet after me?' Second I heard from the Prophet on the day of conquest of Khaybar: 'Certainly I will give the flag [of Islam] to a man that loves God and His Messenger and is loved by God and His Messenger'. We hoped to be given the flag, but the Prophet said: 'Call Ali for me!' Ali came while suffering from pain in his eyes. The Prophet gave him the flag and at his hands God granted us victory. Third when the verse of Mubahalah was revealed the Prophet called Ali, Fatimah, Hasan and Husayn and said: 'My Lord! These are my household'.”

(3) Imam Ahmad b. Hanbal narrates from Anas b. Malik that when the verse of tañh3r (33:33) was revealed, for six months the Prophet used to call at the house of Ali and Fatimah every morning on his way to the mosque for the Dawn Prayer and say: “Prayer, O People of the House! 'God only desires to keep away impurity from you, O People of the House! And to purify you a (thorough) purification' (33:33).”

There are also traditions about the meaning of Qurbā (near ones) which has been mentioned several times in the Qur'an. For example, according to the Qur'an, the Prophet did not ask any payment in return for his teachings from the people. He only wanted the people to love his Qurbā for their own benefit. So who are the Qurbā? Zamakhshari, a great Sunni scholar and exegete of the Qur'an, says that when this verse was revealed, the Prophet was asked who is meant by this verse, and to whom all have to be respectful. The Prophet replied: “Ali, Fatimah and their two sons”.

Reason

The Shi'a believe that reason is a reliable source of knowledge and in complete harmony with revelation. According to some hadiths, God has two proofs (hujjah), through which humans can understand His will: the internal one which is reason (al-'aql) and the external, which are the prophets. Sometimes reason is called, “the internal prophet” and the prophets are called “the external reason”. There is an established rule among Shi'a jurists that whatever judgement is made by reason is the same as that made by the religion (shar') and vice versa. It is also unanimously accepted that one of the conditions of moral or legal responsibility is to have sound reason. If someone is insane, he is not considered as responsible upon what he acts. What is expected of the people in religion also varies according to their mental and rational capacity. Those who are very clever and intelligent are expected to be more prepared, pious, and obedient than those who are lay or ignorant.

According to the Qur'an, God requires all human beings to exercise their rational faculty and to ponder on His signs and communications in the universe. On many occasions disbelievers are condemned because of their failure to think or to act according to rational requirements. For example, they are condemned because of their blind imitation of their ancestors, and there are many verses with rhetorical questions, such as: “Do not they think?!” (36:68), “Do not they ponder on the Qur'an?!” (4:82; 47:24) and “In these, there are signs for those who are thoughtful” (13:4; 16:67; 30:28).

In general, reason contributes to religious studies in three major areas: The first is in understanding the realities of the world, such as the existence of God, the truth of religion and scientific facts. The second is in introducing principles of moral values and legal norms, such as the evil of oppression and the good of justice. The third is in setting up standards and logical processes of reasoning and inference. All these three roles of reason are recognised and, indeed, recommended by Islam.

In contrast, the role of revelation or the Scriptures in religious studies can be summed up as follows:

- confirmation of the facts that are already known by reason;
- introducing new subjects that are not known by reason, such as details of resurrection and detailed accounts of moral and legal systems;
- providing sanctions through the religious system of reward and punishment.

At the end, I should mention that there is nothing irrational in Islam. Of course, one has to distinguish between certain and decisive rational judgements, and one's guessing or personal opinions. If there is a case in which it seems that rational judgement is in conflict with certain religious positions, one has to accept that there must be a mistake in at least one side: either it was not a real judgement of reason or it was not a religious law. God never misleads people by telling them to do something through the prophets, and the opposite thing through our God-given reason. There have always been some judgements attributed to reason and taken as contradicting religious positions that after close consideration have proven to be contrary to decisive rational premises.

Consensus

Traditionally, one of the sources of understanding Islam is consensus (ijmā'). According to Shi'a methodology of thought, the consensus of all people or a group of them such as the scholars by itself is not sufficient as a proof (1ujjah); just as one person may make mistake, two, three, or thousands, or even all of them may do so. However, whenever there exists an agreement among all Muslims or Muslim scholars in a way whereby the agreement unveils the Sunnah, it can serve as a proof, as an instrument to uncover the will of God. For example, when we find that every Muslim in the time of the Prophet said his prayer in a certain way we realize that the Prophet had instructed them to do so; otherwise there would be no factor to unify their action. It is not possible to imagine that they had all acted blindly and without instruction, or that they all made mistakes and the Prophet did not correct them.

Thus, for the Shi'a consensus in itself is not a proof. It only works when it leads to the discovery of Sunnah. Accordingly, if Muslims today agree on a given subject, while a scholar has doubt about the Islamic judgement on that subject, he methodologically cannot say that because everybody says so, I also say the same. There have been many cases in the history where all human beings believed in the same way and later they found out that they were wrong, e.g. the earth being flat. It is only the Qur'an and the Sunnah that are unquestionably true and immune from any error or mistake. This approach grants a type of dynamism to Shi'i thought, so that every generation of scholars and even any single scholar is able and indeed is required to refer directly to the Qur'an and Sunnah and conduct his own original ijtihād, that is his investigation and independent judgement. Ijtihād has never been banned or closed in the Shi'a world. The Shi'a believe that the view of no jurist, however high his position, is immune from scientific questioning or challenge. Of course, as in any other discipline, every religious scholar needs to consult and examine carefully the works of his predecessors.

Chapter 3: Doctines

Throughout the history of Islam, Muslims, in spite of their differences, have had a lot of agreement, not only in many principles of Islam, but also in many of its practices. The Qur'an and the great personality of the Prophet on the one hand, and the sincere love and devotion of all Muslims towards them on the other, have unified Muslims and made out of them a real nation that has its own identity, heritage, aims, objectives and destiny. The hostility of the enemies of Islam, along with the challenges of the age, have also helped to awaken and strengthen the sense of unity and brotherhood among Muslims. The Qur'anic and prophetic call for unity and brotherhood has always been echoed by great leading Islamic personalities of different schools of Islam.

With respect to beliefs, all Muslims share the belief in God and His unity, the prophets in general and the mission of the Prophet Muhammad in particular, the Resurrection, and the just and equal treatment of everybody on the Day of Judgement. These are the most fundamental principles of Islam which are agreed upon by all Muslims. An outside view about the extent of the agreement between Shi'a and Sunni Muslims is expressed in the following passage:

Since the Iranian Revolution everyone knows that Shi'ites are Muslims, like the Sunnis respecting the central dogma of the oneness of God, the same sacred writing (the Koran), the same Prophet Mohammad, the same belief in the resurrection followed by the last Judgement and the same fundamental obligations, prayer, fasting, pilgrimage, almsgiving, and jihād (holy war). These common points are more important than the differences: there is no longer any theoretical objection to a Shi'ite performing his prayers with a Sunni, or vice versa although many difficulties have existed in the past and in practice still remain. (Richard, p. 5; with abbreviation)

In what follows, we will proceed by outlining principles of religion or articles of faith. Some of the characteristic beliefs of the Shi'a will be examined thereafter.

Principles of religion

(1) Unity of God

The Islamic faith is formulated by the declaration of two facts, i.e. that there is no god (i.e. no one worthy of worship) but God (Allah) and that Muhammad is His messenger. (LÅ ILÅHA ILLALLÅH MUHAMMADUR-RASŪLULLÅH). Muslims believe that Allah is ONE. He has no partner or children. He is the Beginning and He is the End. He is Omnipotent, Omniscient and Omnipresent. The Qur'an says that He is closer to man than his jugular vein, but He cannot be seen by eyes or encompassed by human intellect. In a supplication, Imam Ali says:

Oh God, verily I ask Thee by Thy Name, in the name of Allah, the All-merciful, the All-compassionate, O the Possessor of Majesty and Splendour, the Living, the Self-subsistent, the Eternal, there is no God other than Thee.

Divine justice: Among divine attributes the Shi'a put a great emphasis on justice. Of course, all Muslims believe that God is just ('ādil), in that God never commits any injustice towards His servants, and He never oppresses anyone. This fact is clearly expressed by the Qur'an:

God is not in the least unjust to the servants. (3:182 & 8:51 & 22:10)

Your Lord is not in the least unjust to the servants. (41:46)

I am not in the least unjust to the servants. (50:29)

Surely God does not do injustice to the weight of an atom. (4:40)

Surely God does not do any injustice to people, but people are unjust to themselves. (10:44)

In addition to the importance of divine justice in itself, the other reason for the emphasis on this doctrine by the Shi'a, is that the Ash'arites, a group of Sunni theologians, believe that there is no objective criteria for morally right or wrong acts. Good means what God performs or whatever is commanded by God. Therefore, God's acts and commands are good and just by definition. They believe that if God had asked us to tell lies, telling lies would have become good and if God were to send the pious people to hell that would be just. Of course, they believe that God never does such acts, not because they are wrong in themselves, but because in practice He has said that those acts are wrong. The Ash'arites also believe that human beings do not have free-will and it is God who creates their acts without them having any role therein. They are only receptacles of divine acts.

The Shi‘a and some other Sunni theologians, such as the Mu‘tazilites, believe that good and bad, and right and wrong are objective, and that there are rational criteria for moral judgements. In other words, they believe in intrinsic goodness and badness. They believe that in reality there is a difference between, say, justice and oppression and it is not arbitrary that God has commanded us to be just and not to oppress anyone, even our enemies. They also believe that human beings are free and responsible for their acts. Of course, the Mu‘tazilites believe in tafwī*, i.e. that God has handed over His authority over human voluntary acts to them and they have complete control over their acts. But the Shi‘a believe that although determinism (jabr) is wrong and against divine justice, and that human beings are free, their freedom and power is limited, and God has an overall authority upon their acts. This fact is expressed in the well-known formulation of Imam Ja‘far al-Sadiq:

“There is no compulsion (jabr), nor is there absolute delegation of power (tafwī*), but the real position is between the two extremes.”

Due to the ultimate importance of this subject for any value system, the Shi‘a have always stressed the doctrine of divine justice and have frequently introduced it along with taw1īd (divine unity), prophethood, Imamate (divine leadership) and Resurrection as one of the five Principles of the Faith (U{ūl al-Madhhab) in contrast to taw1īd, prophethood and resurrection which count as the three Principles of Religion (U{?l al-Dīn), which are shared by all Muslims.

This emphasis on the issue of divine justice has not been limited to the theoretical aspect of Shi‘i Islam. Indeed, the Shi‘a see the issue of justice as a fundamental aspect of Islam, and they have always called for the implementation of the principle of justice on the social level as well.

(2) Prophethood

God has created mankind for a purpose (51:56). He has given man reason and free-will to find his way towards his perfection and happiness. He has also supplemented the human reason with divine revelation. Through His wisdom and justice, He has not left any people or corner of the world without guidance; He has sent prophets to all nations to instruct and guide them (10:47 and 16:36).

The first prophet was Adam and the last was Muhammad, the Seal of prophets (33:40). The Qur’an mentions twenty-five of the prophets and states that there were many more (40:78). Through the indications of hadiths, Muslims believe that there have been 124,000 prophets. Amongst those mentioned in the Qur’an are Adam, Noah, Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Lot, Jacob, Joseph, Job, Moses, Aaron, Ezekiel, David, Solomon, Jonah, Zachariah, John the Baptist, Jesus and Muhammad. Among them, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad had universal missions and brought new codes of law. They are called, "Ulū al-‘Azm" meaning those of great determination.

Other than itself, the Qur’an speaks of four Heavenly books: the Book of Abraham (87:19); the Psalms of David (4:163 and 17:55); the Torah of Moses (2:87, 3:3 & 4, 6:91 & 154) and the Gospel of Jesus (5:46).

A Muslim must believe in all the Holy Books (2:4 & 285) and in all the prophets (4:152). As we will see later, the Shi‘a also believe that all the prophets were necessarily infallible and sinless prior to and during their mission.

The Shi‘a, like other Muslims, have a great love for the Prophet Muhammad. They see in the Prophet Muhammad the perfect model of entire reliance on God, profound knowledge of God, ultimate devotion to God, sincere obedience to the divine will, the noblest of character, and compassion and mercy for all mankind. It was not accidental that he was chosen by God to deliver His final and most perfect message for humanity. To be able to receive divine revelation and be addressed by heaven requires one to possess a very high calibre. Naturally to be able to receive the most perfect revelation requires the highest calibre.

The personal character and behaviour of the Prophet contributed greatly to the progress of Islam. He was known to be an honest, trustworthy and pious person from childhood. During his prophethood, he always lived by his principles and values. In the times of ease as well as difficulty, security as well as fear, peace as well as war, victory as well as defeat, he always manifested humility, justice and confidence. He was so humble that he never admired himself, he never felt superior to others and he never lived a life of luxury. Both when he was alone and powerless as well, as when he ruled the Arab peninsula and Muslims were whole-heartedly following him, he behaved the same. He lived very simply and was always with the people, especially the poor. He had no palace nor guard. When he was sitting with his companions no one could distinguish him from others by considering his seat or clothes. It was only his words and spirituality that distinguished him from others.

He was so just that he never ignored the rights of anyone, even his enemies. He exemplified in his life the Qur'anic command, "O you who believe! Be upright for God, bearers of witness with justice, and let not hatred of a people incite you not to act equitably; act equitably, that is nearer to piety" (5:8).

Before battles, he always gave instructions to his soldiers not to harm women, children, the elderly, and those who surrendered, not to destroy farms and gardens, not to chase those who had escaped from the war front, and to be kind to their captives.

Just before his demise, the Prophet announced in the Mosque: "Whoever among you feels that I have done injustice to him, come forward and do justice. Surely, enacting justice in this world is better in my view than being taken account of in the Hereafter in front of the angels and the Prophets."

Those present in the Mosque wept, for they were reminded of all the sacrifices that the Prophet had made for them and the troubles that he had undergone in order to guide them. They knew that he never gave any priority to his own needs and never preferred his comfort and convenience to others. They therefore responded with statements of deep gratitude and profound respect. But one among them, Sawadah b. Qays, stood up and said: "May my father and mother be your ransom! O Messenger of God! On your return from Ta'if, I came to welcome you while you were riding your camel. You raised your stick to direct your camel, but the stick struck my stomach. I do not know whether this strike was intentional or unintentional." The Prophet replied: "I seek refuge from God from having done so intentionally."

The Prophet then asked Bilal to go to the house of Fatimah and bring the same stick. After the stick was brought, the Prophet told Sawadah to retaliate by hitting him back. Sawadah said that the stick had struck the skin of his stomach. The Prophet therefore lifted his shirt so that Sawadah could in return strike his skin. At that moment, Sawadah asked: "O Messenger of God! Do you allow me to touch my mouth to your stomach?" The Prophet gave him permission. Sawadah then kissed the stomach of the Prophet and prayed that because of this act of his, God would protect him from fire on the Day of Resurrection. The Prophet said: "O Sawadah! Will you pardon me or do you still wish to retaliate?" He replied: "I pardon you." The Prophet then prayed: "O God! Pardon Sawadah b. Qays as he pardoned Your Prophet, Muhammad!"

Imāmah: As mentioned earlier, the Shi‘a believe in the institution of Imāmah as a continuation of prophethood. In Arabic the term "Imām" literally means "leader". An Imam, in general terminology, may be good or bad, and the extent of his leadership may be very broad, such as leading a whole nation, or limited such as leading congregations in a mosque. However, in the Shi‘i faith the Imam in its narrower sense is the person who is in charge of all political and religious affairs of the Islamic nation. More exactly, the Imam is the person who is appointed by God and introduced by the Prophet and then by each preceding Imam by explicit designation (na{{) to lead the Muslim community, interpret and protect the religion and the law (shar3‘ah), and guide the community in all affairs. The Imam is the Representative of God on earth (khal3fat-Allāh) and the successor of the Prophet. He must be sinless and possess divine knowledge of both the exoteric and the esoteric meaning of the Qur'an.

The Sunni View: Sunni Muslims use the term Imam as an equivalent to the term "Caliph" (khal3fah). In Arabic the term "khal3fah" means successor. The term has been used as a title for whoever took the power and ruled the Islamic state after the demise of the Prophet Muhammad. A Caliph may be elected, or nominated by his predecessor, or selected by a committee, or may even acquire power through military force. A Caliph need not be sinless. Neither does he need to be superior to others in qualities, such as faith or knowledge.

The Twelver Shi‘a who constitute the vast majority of Shi‘a Muslims believe that the Prophet was succeeded by twelve Imams. These are:

1. Imam Ali b. Abu Talib Martyred 40/659

2. Imam Hasan b. Ali Martyred 50/669

3. Imam Husayn b. Ali Martyred 61/680

4. Imam Ali b. Husayn Martyred 95/712

5. Imam Muhammad b. Ali Martyred 114/732.

6. Imam Ja'far b. Muhammad Martyred 148/765

7. Imam Musa b. Ja'far Martyred 183/799

8. Imam Ali b. Musa Martyred 203/817

9. Imam Muhammad b. Ali Martyred 220/835

10. Imam Ali b. Muhammad Martyred 254/868

11. Imam Hasan b. Ali Martyred 260/872

12. Imam al-Mahdi Born 255/868.

The belief in a saviour is shared by most (if not all) religions. In Islam, the idea of a saviour is very deliberately presented in the doctrine of al-Mahdi (the Guided) who will rise up with divine blessing and fill the earth with justice after it has been filled with injustice and oppression. The idea of a saviour or a good end for the world is indicated in many Qur'anic verses and Islamic hadiths. For example, we read in the Qur'an:

We have written in the Psalms following the Reminder: "My honourable servants shall inherit the earth" (21:105).

Yet we wanted to endow those who were considered inferior on earth, and make them into leaders and make them [Our] heirs (28:5).

The following are only some examples of hadiths on the same idea of the saviour narrated in both Sunni and Shi'a sources:

1. The Prophet said:

Even if the entire duration of the world's existence has already been exhausted and only one day is left (before the day of judgment), God will expand that day to such a length of time, as to accommodate the kingdom of a person from my household who will be called by my name.

2. The Prophet also said:

Al-Mahdi is one of us, the members of the household (Ahlul-Bayt). God will prepare for him (his affairs) in one night.

3. Furthermore, the Prophet said:

Al-Mahdi will be of my family, of the descendants of Fatimah.

4. It is also narrated from Jabir b. Abdillah al-Ansari that he heard the Messenger of God saying:

A group of my nation will fight for the truth until the Day of Judgment. When Jesus son of Mary will descend, and their leader will ask him to lead the prayer, Jesus will decline, saying: "No, verily among you God has made leaders for others in order to honour this nation".

Thus, al-Mahdi will have a universal mission. His name will be the same as the name of the Prophet Muhammad and he will be from the progeny of the Lady Fatimah. The Shi'a believe that he is the son of Imam Hasan al-'Askari. He was born in 255 (A.H). His occultation began in the year 260 (A.H). He is still alive, but protected by God in the state of occultation till preparations are made for his reappearance. The same is believed by some Sunni scholars, while some other Sunni scholars believe that he has not yet been born. Sayyid Muhsin al-Amin in his A'yān al-Shi'ah has named thirteen examples of those Sunni scholars who have asserted that al-Mahdi is the son of Imam Hasan and already born, such as Muhammad b. Yousuf al-Kanjī al-Shafi'ī in his Al-Bayān fī Akhbār |āhib al-Zamān and Kifāyat al- ālib fī Manāqib Ali b. Abī ālib; Nūr al-Dīn Ali b. Muhammad al-Mālikī in his Al-Fu{ūl al-Muhimmah fī Ma'rifat al-A'immah and Ibn al-Jawzī in his well-known Tadhkirat al-Khawā{{.

(3) Resurrection

The world will come to an end on the Day of the Resurrection (Qiyāmah), the Day of Judgement. All will be resurrected and presented before God who will decide their individual fates according to their beliefs and deeds in this world. Good will be rewarded and evil be punished (22:1, 2 & 6-9; 3:185; 6:62). God will treat people with justice but the dominant factor in the administration of His Justice will be His Mercy (6:12).

Note:

Although all Muslims believe in the above principles of Islam, there is a slight difference in their articulation of these beliefs and practices. Shi‘a Muslims express the above beliefs as principles or roots of the religion (U{?l al-Dīn) and the acts of worship to follow as practices or branches of the religion (Fur?‘ al-Dīn). The reason for such an articulation is that those beliefs are the most fundamental aspects of the religion and the criteria for being considered a Muslim. However, the mandatory acts of worship are implications of being faithful, since genuine faith manifests itself in practices. Sunni Muslims usually present the declaration of Islam (kalimah) consisting of bearing witness that there is no god but God (Allah) and that Muhammad is His Messenger together with four acts of worship, i.e. the daily prayer, fasting, pilgrimage to Mecca and almsgiving as the Five Pillars of Faith. They consider other acts of worship such as enjoining good and forbidding evil, and struggle in the way of God as obligatory acts that are not included amongst the Pillars of Faith.

Chapter 4: Practices

The main mandatory acts of worship accepted by both Sunni and Shi‘a Muslims are:

1. The Daily Prayers

Every Muslim from the time he or she attains puberty must perform five daily prayers ({alā}). To be able to begin the prayer one must first perform the ritual ablution (wu*?’) in the prescribed form. Then, one stands facing Mecca and makes an intention to perform the specific prayer of the time in order to attain proximity to God. This intention must be kept at all times during the prayer. If someone forgets what he is doing, or prays in order to show off, or for any other selfish motive, his prayer becomes void. The actual prayer starts when the person utters: Allāh-u Akbar (God is the Greatest). With this he enters the formal state of prayer in which he remains until the completion of his prayers.

Each prayer consists of two to four units (rak‘ah). Each unit consists of:

i. reciting the opening chapter of the Qur’an and another chapter such as Taw1īd or Qadr;

ii. bowing down (ruk?‘) and praising and glorifying God in that position;

iii. performing two prostrations (sajdah) and then praising and glorifying God.

The prayers are ended by bearing witness that God is One and has no partners and that Muhammad is His servant and messenger with salutations upon him and his household (tashahhud) and offering peace to the Prophet, all the righteous people, and all who are engaged in prayers (tasl3m).

The daily prayer is the most important form of worship and remembrance of the Lord. The Qur’an says:

Surely prayer keeps (one) away from indecency and evil, and certainly the remembrance of God is greater, and God knows what you do. (29:45)

2. Fasting

The second act of worship is fasting ({awm) during the month of Ramadan (rama*ān), the ninth month of the Islamic calendar. In this month, Muslims refrain from eating, drinking and sexual activity with their spouses from dawn to sunset. Like any other acts of worship, fasting must be performed with pure intention, that is, solely for the sake of God and to attain proximity to Him. Along with closeness to God and achieving His pleasure, fasting has many other benefits, such as strengthening one’s determination, reminding people of God’s blessings which they may take for granted, such as the food that they enjoy everyday, remembering the hunger and thirst of the Day of Judgement, helping the rich to understand what the poor experience in order to awaken their sense of benevolence and sympathy, weakening one’s appetites and lower desires, and letting rational understanding and spiritual awareness flourish. The Qur’an says:

O you who believe! Fasting is prescribed for you, as it was prescribed for those before you, so that you may guard (against evil). (2:183)

3. Pilgrimage to Mecca

Every Muslim who has attained puberty, and is financially and physically capable, must once perform pilgrimage to Mecca (hajj) in the month of Dhu’l-Hijjah, the twelfth month of the Islamic calendar. The most important Mosque for Muslims all over the world is called Masjid al-2arām, which is the sanctuary of the Ka‘bah, and is located in Mecca.

All Muslims face towards the Ka‘bah in their prayers. The Ka‘bah is the cubical construction built by the Prophet Abraham and his son, Prophet Ishmael, on the foundations of what had originally been built by the Prophet Adam. Indeed, to a great extent, pilgrimage to Mecca is a symbolic reconstruction of what the Prophet Abraham, the arch monotheist went through in that very place about four thousand years ago. After a long journey, when Abraham arrived in Mecca he was asked by God to make preparations for pilgrims going to Mecca. The Qur’an says:

Do not associate with Me anything, and purify My house for those who circle around it and stand to pray and bow and prostrate themselves. And proclaim among the people the pilgrimage. They will come to you on foot and on

every lean camel from every remote path so that they may witness the benefits for them; and mention the name of God during the appointed days over what He has given them (22:26-28).

Most surely the first house appointed for men is the one at Bekka (Mecca), blessed and a guidance for the nations. In it are clear signs, the standing place of Abraham, and whoever enters it shall be secure. Pilgrimage to the House is incumbent upon people for the sake of God, (upon) everyone who is able to undertake the journey to it; and whoever turns away, then surely God is Self-sufficient, above any need of the worlds (3:96 &97).

Pilgrimage to Mecca is full of unforgettable experiences. Among them, perhaps the most outstanding are selflessness, brotherhood, equality and simplicity. Every year millions of Muslims from different continents leave their home, family, business, and whatever else is dear to them, and set out on their journey towards Mecca, located in a desert. Everyone is asked to be present there in the same places at the same time all wearing the same clothes and performing the same rites. The rich and the poor, the king and the ordinary man, the elite and the layman all stand shoulder to shoulder and wear two pieces of white cloth. This is something that everyone must experience at least once in his lifetime, and should then try to implement lessons learnt from the experience in his day to day life.

4. Almsgiving

Giving charity is highly recommended in the Qur’an and Sunnah and the reward for charitable acts is great. Although everything including one’s financial possessions belongs to God in reality, the Qur’an presents giving charity as offering a loan to God:

Who is the one that lends to God a good lending so that God may give him double? (57:11)

In addition to voluntary charities, there are certain types of charity that are obligatory. For example, one type of almsgiving is zakāt, a wealth tax of a small percentage (usually 2.5%). Paying zakāt is not a gift for the poor but rather is their due right that must be observed:

And in their properties is the right of the beggar and the destitute (51:19).

Imam Ali also said:

God the Glorified has fixed the livelihood of the destitute in the wealth of the rich. Consequently, whenever the destitute remains hungry, it is because some rich persons have denied him his share.

Those whose possessions of certain amounts of wheat, barley, dates, raisins, gold, silver, camels, cows and sheep surpass certain quantities must pay zakāt on a yearly basis to the less fortunate amongst their relatives, the orphans, the needy, the wayfarers and etc. Zakāt may be spent for food, shelter, education, health care, orphanages and other public services.

It is noteworthy that in many verses, paying zakāt is enjoined immediately after the command to perform one’s prayers ({alāt), and as a sign of faith and belief in God. Paying zakāt is an act of worship, so it must be performed for the sake of God. Therefore, not only does it help the needy and contribute to the establishment of social justice and development, but it also purifies the soul of those who pay it. The Qur’an says:

Take alms from their wealth in order to purify and sanctify them (9:103).

Khums: Shi‘a Muslims also believe in another obligatory tax, called khums. In Arabic Khums literally means one fifth. It is a 20% tax on the excess profit that a person annually makes. At the end of one’s financial year, one pays 20% of all one’s earnings after deducting house-hold and commercial expenses. The obligation to pay khums has been mentioned in the Qur’an:

And know that whatever profit you may attain, one fifth of it is assigned to God and the Messenger, and to the near relatives [of the Messenger] and the orphans, the destitute, and the wayfarer, if you have believed in God and that which We sent down to our servant [Muhammad] (8:41).

Sunni Muslims usually believe that the verse only refers to what Muslims earn when they win a battle (booty) and consider it to be a type of zakāt.

According to Shi‘i jurisprudence, half of the khums belongs to the twelfth Imam, the remaining member of the household of the Prophet and his successor, and the other half to the poor descendants of the Prophet, called

“sayyids”. Khums must be spent under the supervision of a Shi‘a religious authority (marji‘ al-taqlīd), i.e. the grand jurist (Ayatollah) that one follows in practical issues. This is to make sure that it is spent in a way with which Imam Mahdi is pleased. The portion belonging to the Imam is usually spent on Islamic seminaries and other educational projects such as publishing useful books, or building Mosques, Islamic centres, and schools.

5. Struggle for the sake of God

Every Muslim has to struggle hard and strive for the sake of God in different ways to make improvements to human life in general and his individual life in particular. The Qur’an says:

He has created you upon the Earth and has asked you to develop it (11:61).

To be indifferent to human catastrophes or to be lazy in one’s personal life is greatly condemned. On the contrary, the one who works hard to earn some money to spend on his family and improve their living conditions is considered as a hero in the struggle for the sake of God, a mujāhid. A very outstanding and vital case of this struggle (jihād) is to defend human rights such as liberty, freedom, and Islamic and human values such as justice, dignity, and a Muslim nation’s integrity. The Qur’an says:

Permission [to fight] is given to those against whom war is being wrongfully and offensively waged, and surely God is able to give them victory. Those who have been expelled from their homes unjustly, only because they said, “Our Lord is God…” (22:39-40).

And why do you not fight for the sake of God and the utterly oppressed men, women, and children who are crying out, “O Lord! Rescue us from this town whose people are oppressors, and raise for us from You one who will protect, and raise for us from You one who will help” (4:75).

Of course, jihād also includes more personal cases in which one’s family, property or reputation is endangered, usurped or damaged. According to Islamic traditions, one who is killed while defending his family or land achieves the same position as the soldier who is martyred in the warfront.

Jihād must continue until the just cause is achieved. The Qur’an says: “Fight against aggressors until oppression is stopped” (2:193). Of course, on a larger scale, a real jihād has always existed from the dawn of creation of mankind, between good and evil, truth and falsehood, and between the party of God and the party of Satan. This battle will more or less continue till the end of the time when the earth will be filled with justice under the government of al-Mahdi.

Jihād, whether it be with the pen, the tongue, a weapon, or any other means is an act of worship, and must be performed with pure intention, that is, only for the sake of God and for just causes. No one is allowed to fight or struggle for materialistic purposes, for personal glory or the glory of any tribe, race, nation, or any other oppressive cause such as occupying others’ land to become richer or more powerful. Indeed, jihād first of all starts within the inner self of a mujāhid (one who struggles). To make sure that one can win the external battle against evil, one has to fight first against his own lower desires and lusts, liberate his own heart from any satanic occupation, and regain the dignity and honour that God the Almighty has given human beings. The Qur’an says:

O the soul at peace, return to your Lord, well-pleased (with Him), well-pleasing (Him). So enter among My true servants and enter into My Paradise! (89:27-30)

According to a well-known tradition, once, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him and his family) said to a group of his companions who had won a battle: “Well-done! Welcome to those people who have completed the minor jihād (al- jihād al-a{ghar) and on whom the major jihād (al- jihād al-akbar) is still incumbent.” Astonished, the companions who had defeated their enemies and were prepared to give up the dearest thing to them, i.e. their life to defend Islam asked, “What is the major jihād?” The Prophet Muhammad replied: “The major jihād is to fight against your own selves [or your souls]”. Thus, to resist one’s temptations, and restrain one’s soul from evil, and to purify one’s self is the greatest and the most difficult jihād.

At the end, let us refer to some of the merits of those who struggle for the sake of God as explained by God Himself:

Those who believe, and have left their homes and strive hard with their wealth and their lives in God's way, are much higher in rank with God. These are they who are triumphant. Their Lord gives them good tidings of mercy from Him, and acceptance, and Gardens where enduring pleasures will be theirs. There they will abide forever. Surely with God there is a Mighty reward (9:20-22).

6. Enjoining good and forbidding evil

Enjoining good (al-amr bi al-maʻrūf) and forbidding evil (al-nahy ʻan al-munkar) are two acts of worship that every mature Muslim has to perform whenever applicable. No Muslim can be indifferent to what happens in the world around him. Part of the social responsibilities of each individual Muslim is to observe human and religious values, and whenever any of these values is deliberately overlooked or violated, he must advise and direct those responsible towards performing good and against committing bad and sinful acts (3:103, 109 & 113; 7:199; 9:71 & 112; 22:41).

Chapter 5: The Shi'a in the World

According to UNFPA (the United Nations Population Fund) and other sources, in the year 1999 the world population exceeded six billion. Around twenty three percent of this population (that is around 1.5 billion) adhere to Islam. A breakdown of the Muslim population of the world in 2003 is estimated as follows:

Continent	Population	Muslim Population	Muslim Percentage
Africa	861.20	414.26	48.10
Asia	3830.10	1010.65	26.39
Europe	727.40	51.19	7.04
North America	323.10	6.62	2.05
South America	539.75	1.64	0.30
Oceania	32.23	0.35	1.09
Total	6313.78	1484.71	23.52

Muslims live all over the world. The total number of countries with Muslim inhabitants is 208. About 85% of the Muslims live outside the Arab world. The majority of Muslims live to the east of the borders of Iran, especially in Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Malaysia and Indonesia. Indonesia is the most populous Muslim country.

Among Muslims, who constitute the minority of the world population, the Shi‘a constitute about 10% of Muslims, which according to the current population of the world would amount to 120,000,000. For example, Britannica 2002 (Deluxe Edition) reads:

“Over the centuries the ShiÔite movement has deeply influenced all Sunnite Islam, and its adherents numbered about 60 to 80 million in the late 20th century, or one-tenth of all Islam. Shi‘ism (Arabic: Shi‘ah, or Shi‘i Islam) is the majority faith in Iran, Iraq, and perhaps Yemen (San‘ā') and has adherents in Syria, Lebanon, East Africa, India, and Pakistan.”

According to some sources, the figure is 11%. Thus, the present Shi‘a population of the world must be around 132,000,000. A breakdown of the Shi‘a population in some Asian countries with a Shi‘a majority or with a considerable percentage of Shi‘a population can be summed up as follows:

Afghanistan	Population (1998): 24,792,000. Religious affiliation (1990): Sunni Muslim 84%; Shi‘a Muslim 15%; other 1%.
Azerbaijan	Population (1998): 7,650,000. / Religious affiliation (1991): ShiÔi Muslim 70%; Sunni Muslim 30%.
Bahrain	Population (1998): 633,000. / Religious affiliation (1991): Muslim 81.8%, of which ShiÔi 61.3%, Sunni 20.5%; Christian 8.5%; other 9.7%.
India	Population (1998): 984,004,000. / Religious affiliation (1995): Hindu 81.3%; Muslim 12.0%, of which Sunni 9.0%, ShiÔi 3.0%; Christian 2.3%, of which Protestant 1.1%, Roman Catholic 1.0%; Sikh 1.9%; Buddhist 0.8%; Jain 0.4%; Zoroastrian 0.01%; other 1.3%.
Iran	Population (1998): 61,531,000 / Religious affiliation (1995): Muslim 99.0%; (ShiÔi 93.4%, Sunni 5.6%); Christian 0.3%; Zoroastrian 0.05%; Jewish 0.05%.
Iraq	Population (1998): 21,722,000. / Religious affiliation (1994): ShiÔi Muslim 62.5%; Sunni Muslim 34.5%; Christian (primarily Chaldean rite and Syrian rite Roman Catholic and Nestorian) 2.7%; other (primarily Yazidi syncretist) 0.3%.
Jordan	Population (1998): 4,682,000. /Religious affiliation (1995): Sunni Muslim 96.5%; Christian 3.5%.
Kuwait	Population (1998): 1,866,000. / Religious affiliation (1995): Muslim 85%, of which Sunni 45%, ShiÔa 30%; other Muslim 10%; other (mostly Christian and Hindu) 15.0%.
Lebanon	Population (1998): 3,506,000. / Religious affiliation (1995): Muslim 55.3%, of which ShiÔi 34.0%, Sunni 21.3%; Christian 37.6%, of which Catholic 25.1% (Maronite 19.0%, Greek Catholic or Malachite 4.6%), Orthodox 11.7% (Greek Orthodox 6.0%, Armenian Apostolic 5.2%), Protestant 0.5%; Druze 7.1%.
Oman	Population (1998): 2,364,000. / Religious affiliation (1993): Muslim 87.7%, of which Ibadiyah Muslim c. 75% (principal minorities are Sunni Muslim and ShiÔi Muslim); Hindu 7.4%; Christian 3.9%; Buddhist 0.5%; other 0.5%.

Pakistan	Population (1998): 141,900,000./ Religious affiliation (1993): Muslim 95.0%3 (mostly Sunni, with ShiÔi comprising about 20% of total population); Christian 2.0%; Hindu 1.8%; others (including Ahmadiyah) 1.2%.
Saudi Arabia	Population (1998): 20,786,000./ Religious affiliation (1992): Sunni Muslims 93.3%, ShiÔi Muslims 3.3%.
Syria	Population (1998): 15,335,000. / Religious affiliation (1992): Muslim 86.0%, of which Sunni 74.0%, ÔAlawite (ShiÔi) 12.0%; Christian 8.9%; Druze 3.0%; other 1.0%.
Tajikistan	Population (1997): 6,112,000. / Religious affiliation (1995): Sunni Muslim 80.0%; ShiÔi Muslim 5.0%; Russian Orthodox 1.5%; Jewish 0.1%; other (mostly nonreligious) 13.4%.
Turkey	Population (1998): 64,567,000. / Religious affiliation (1994): Sunni Muslim c. 80.0%; ShiÔi Muslim c. 19.8%, of which ÔAlawi c. 14.0%; Christian c. 0.2%.
United Arab Emirates	Population (1998): 2,744,000. / Religious affiliation (1995): Muslim 96.0% (Sunni 80.0%, ShiÔi 16.0%); other (mostly Christian and Hindu) 4.0%.
Yemen	Population (2000): 18,260,000. / Religious affiliation (1995): Muslim 99.9% (Sunni c. 60.0%, ShiÔi c. 40.0%); other 0.1%.

The Shi‘a population in some countries is disputed. Some believe that the population of the Shi‘a is much higher than official figures, because of either a lack of accurate statistics or political issues..

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Note:

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by Mohammad A. Shomali

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